

Abigail McNaughton (6th Grade: Cleveland, Ohio)
Level I First Place Winner
Letter to Armstrong Sperry concerning his book, *Call it Courage*

Dear Armstrong Sperry:

Fear. It is invisible yet it renders all mankind helpless. It is the element that brings the strongest to their knees and it rules nations. Fear is something that seems avoidable but isn't. It conquers all those who ignore it or pretend that it doesn't exist. No one can escape it and all must face it.

In my mind those who can't admit they're afraid constantly tell themselves they're incredibly bold are cowards while those who confess to them are truly brave. Your book, *Call it Courage*, has taught me to stand up for myself and face my fears. Mafatu lived on an island, surrounded by the ocean that killed his mother. It scared him to think of the whispered promises of the ocean doing the same to him. I live in an ordinary city, but I had to go to a school with bullies I dreaded. I had been afraid of being excluded and mocked just because I was shorter than everyone else for years before I read your book. Practically living in misery, I found refuge in reading.

Books became the savior of my world. Eventually, my hunger for reading led me to *Call it Courage* where I met Mafatu. He experienced similar circumstances, where kids made fun of him and excluded him just because he was different. The villagers were "fearless" fisherman, whereas he could barely dive for clams. Immediately I felt a connection. I was impressed by how he reacted. Instead of going fishing to prove his worth (like all of the other island boys), Mafatu made his own path by leaving his people and his home. There was a time where I tried to play basketball with my classmates, but they purposely fouled me and laughed when I couldn't make the foul shot because of my short stature. I was too frightened to stand up for myself, too paralyzed to deny their merciless torments. After I read your book, I realized that I shouldn't prove myself by being like everybody else but by being different.

So I took to writing stories and eventually winning some prizes, though some said it was just dumb luck. I proved them wrong. Soon, all the boys had to admit that I had talent. I felt like Mafatu, slaying the beasts one at a time when everyone said he couldn't.

I also shared some of Mafatu's character flaws. When he made the bad decision to work on his boat instead of climbing to the plateau to spot any approaching dangers he was almost caught and sacrificed by the "eaters-of-men." Often, I'm like that in the sense that I escape doing chores by reading, and then have to face the "punishment-of-mom." Comparing these two similar scenarios, I learned a side lesson of not neglecting my chores even if I'd rather being doing something else.

I viewed all the problems that Mafatu conquered as stepping stones to accomplishing his goal: gaining courage. When I finished the book, I couldn't believe how much I had changed. Your book helped me on my quest for courage. Thanks to you, I no longer have to worry about the laughter or taunts that once echoed in my nightmares. Your book has taught me that fears can be conquered. You haven't me a special sentiment that says "I Can" when everyone else says otherwise. I will carry that feeling with me all my life. I guess, you could call it courage.

Sincerely,
Abigail McNaughton